

# **EMS Safety Bulletin: Provider Mental Health & CISM**

## **What is CISM?**

Critical Incident Stress Management, or CISM, is a process used to help EMS providers successfully cope with overwhelming stress from one or more critical incidents. According to OSHA, "Workers responding to emergency events and or disasters will see and experience events that will strain their ability to function. These events, which include having to witness or experience tragedy, death, serious injuries and threatening situations, are called "Critical Incidents." The physical and psychological well-being of those experiencing this stress, as well as their future ability to function through a prolonged response, will depend upon how they manage this stress." What this means is that those "intense" calls can cause emergency responders stress to the point that it can affect job performance as well as everyday life.

### ***Examples of critical incidents may include:***

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|---------------------------------------|---|--------------------|
| *Suicides                             | *Injury or death of an emergency worker | *Prolonged events  |
| *Injury or death of children          | *Mass casualty incidents                | *Natural disasters |
| *Threats to emergency worker's safety |   |                    |

## **How to spot someone suffering from critical stress**

How do we know when someone is under too much stress? It can be obvious, such as sudden onset of alcohol abuse, or more subtle, such as trouble sleeping or a change in eating habits and it can occur right after a critical incident or much later. Since we all process stress differently, knowing yourself, your crew, and your limits can help you to identify when the stress has gotten to be too much to cope with alone. Remember that we all process stress differently.

### ***Common symptoms of critical stress overload may include:***

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|--|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| *Fatigue                               | *Nausea                       | *GI upsets                    |
| *Memory loss                           | *Concentration problems       | *Problem solving difficulties |
| *Anxiety                               | *Fears                        | *Depression                   |
| *Identification with the victims       | *Nightmares                   | *Flashbacks                   |
| *Fear of repeating the stressful event | *Mood swings and depression   | *Changes in sleep patterns    |
| *Changes in eating and work habits     | *Unusual actions or behaviors |                               |

## **How can CISM help?**

Critical Incident Stress Management Teams consisting of peers and licensed mental health practitioners are trained to assist providers who are or could possibly be suffering from critical stress. Methods of assisting providers include multiple different response formats ranging from an in-depth debriefing to a more general information session and even one-on-one support. Different intervention formats depend on factors such as the size/scale of the event, the number of providers affected, time since the incident and level of need in the provider community.

There is no stigma associated with utilizing CISM. Someone suffering from the effects of critical stress is not deficient or weak; they are simply having a normal reaction to an abnormal event. CISM, when utilized appropriately, can help emergency responders deal with stress in a safe and healthy way. Also, if further attention is needed, CISM team members can assist the provider in finding mental health resources in their locality that can continue their care.

A debriefing should be requested if stress symptoms continue beyond the first 48-72 hours of the incident as overwhelming stress symptoms usually occur in the first 24-48 hours following a critical incident. If you or your agency is in need of CISM Team assistance, please contact your area's team: Regional CISM Team Hotlines (<http://www.vdh.virginia.gov/OEMS/EO/CISMTeams.htm>).

Sources: OSHA, ODEMSA & TEMS CISM Teams, ICISF, OEMS

